



Learning Each Other's Language

*Strategies to Improve Communication
Between Neurotypicals and Individuals
on the Autism Spectrum*

I HAVE ALWAYS TRIED
TO SURROUND MYSELF
WITH INTERESTING,
CARING AND THOUGHT-
PROVOKING PEOPLE
WHO HELP ME BETTER
UNDERSTAND MYSELF
AND THE WORLD
AROUND ME.

BY SUSAN M. WILCZYNSKI, PH.D., BCBA

“Mary” is a wonderful example of such a friend. With an IQ in the stratosphere, she can talk circles around me in the area of mathematics. But discussing other topics—such as relationship issues—can be a challenge for Mary, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder at the age of 51.

Mary thinks not in words, but in pictures and colors. That means she must translate images and colors into appropriate words before she can ask or answer questions, or offer one of her enlightening, often entertaining insights. But this extra effort does not stop Mary from persevering in her

relationships with others, and finding ways to be heard and understood. Over the years, Mary, a college professor, has developed many compensatory strategies that assist her in communicating with “neurotypical” people—those of us who are not on the autism spectrum.

Communication, however, is a two-way street: The necessary ingredients for effective communication apply equally to individuals on and off the spectrum. It is vitally important that neurotypicals also develop strategies for communicating effectively with family members, friends and colleagues who have autism spectrum disorders (ASD). This article contains observations and suggestions that will help people from *both* groups learn to improve their communication with each other.

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Mutual Respect

As Mary reminds me, social rules can be confusing to individuals on the autism spectrum. As a result, they might sometimes interact with neurotypicals in a way that may seem disrespectful. For example, some individuals on the autism spectrum may ask questions that are too intimate or intrusive, or give the impression of challenging authority or established guidelines. They do not do this to make us feel uncomfortable; oftentimes, they are simply trying to understand our decision-making process. Neurotypicals need to be certain that disrespect was intended before they react.

It is also important to recognize that respect should be mutual. Individuals on the autism spectrum sometimes feel disrespected by neurotypicals as well. All too often, neurotypicals speak to individuals with ASD as if they were incapable of understanding complex issues or like they were children.

“I’ve had people treat me like a child many times, and I felt very disrespected,” Mary shares. “It was very hard for me. I just felt very put down...and I felt distrust toward those people.”

Trust is Built on Truth

To be honest, human beings lie. Some people tell outrageous lies, adding juicy details to enhance their fabricated facts. But most of us are more apt to lie by remaining silent, telling “lies of omission.” Neurotypicals almost expect this to occur on a regular basis and we tend to forgive “little white lies” very easily.

Mary was quick to help me understand that *all* lies are a violation of trust for individuals on the spectrum. If someone with ASD asks you a question, there are only two good choices to consider. First, you can answer the question directly. It is best to provide the clearest explanation possible, leaving out any subtext. Or you can say, “I’m not comfortable answering that question.” Some individuals with ASD may not understand your desire to keep certain information to yourself and may ask why you are not comfortable answering the question. This situation may present its own unique challenge, but at least you have not violated their trust by telling a lie.

There is an emotional aspect of communication to consider too, according to Mary. When she was a girl, and something was wrong, people would say, “There, there; it’s going to be okay.” To

TIPS ON BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATION GAP

As an individual with Asperger’s, Mary offers her perspective of some of the communication challenges that can occur between neurotypicals and individuals on the autism spectrum. No two neurotypicals process information exactly the same way; this is also true for individuals on the autism spectrum. Her tips, below, offer insight on how to overcome some of those challenges. Mary’s unique outlook helps illustrate the value of taking time to better understand those whose life experience may be different from our own.

- ▶ Get to know us as individuals. Each person on the autism spectrum is different just as any two neurotypical people are different.
- ▶ We are an intensely creative people, and we also love details. Talking to us about our special interests is a great way to begin a friendship.
- ▶ Never mistake our naiveté for being childlike. We can be very deep emotionally and very mature in ways that may only become apparent after you get to know us. Avoid patronizing us or treating us like children.
- ▶ Many of us are frightened or mistrustful of people in authority, but when we see that they are doing their jobs properly, we become less fearful. However, some of us have had authority figures judge us harshly and misunderstand our feelings and motives. As you take the time to know us and we see that you are not prejudging us, it will be easier for us to trust you completely.
- ▶ Where appropriate, make it clear what the rules are—and be consistent.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51

(These rules may be complicated, but as long as they are explained, we do not mind.)

- Presume honesty. We may fail to make eye contact because it makes us feel anxious. We may be nervous in social situations with new acquaintances. Some may construe our symptoms of anxiety as related to lying, and may not believe or trust us. If anything, however, most of us are honest to a fault.
- When we answer your questions literally, we mean no offense. If a woman asks if she looks fat in a particular dress, many of us will just look at her, decide if she does and give our opinion. If you feel hurt by anything we say, please know that we do not mean to be hurtful. Many of us cannot read your face to know we have hurt you. We will know only if you tell us.
- Tell us if we are making you uncomfortable. For example, if we invade your personal space, and you just move away, we may not understand why. If you say something like, "I am not comfortable with someone standing that close, but six inches farther apart feels good to me," we will generally be very willing to do that, and not feel hurt.
- We like logical explanations. When you are explaining something to us, it is often easier for us to understand if you give us details first and the big picture second.
- We often lack competence with social skills and interpreting people's intent. Do not use social constructs in explanation, but define things logically and factually. We may verify and clarify often, and although this can seem as if we are being difficult, it is vital to our understanding. In addition, you will often find it important to verify and clarify your understanding of what we say. We greatly appreciate patient people.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 53

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Mary, this felt like a lie because they were not trying to help her fix the situation.

"The flip side of that is that someone like me might see a neurotypical person who's hurt and say, 'Oh, I can fix that,'" Mary explains. "We forget that the person needs us to empathize first and *then* offer helpful suggestions. The lesson here is that we should all learn how to speak each other's language. People on the spectrum need to learn how to empathize first and fix things second, and neurotypicals need to say, 'It's going to be all right' *and then*, 'I'm going to help you fix it.'"

Verify and Clarify

While misunderstandings can arise in conversations between any two people, they

are more likely to occur in a conversation between an individual with ASD and a neurotypical. Why? Because neurotypicals often speak using idioms and abstract concepts. In addition, our conversations sometimes have underlying subtext—unspoken opinions and emotions that can be easily misinterpreted or misunderstood, even by neurotypicals. Mary understands that we neurotypicals often speak this way without being aware of it. Yet, these are exactly the communication issues that most challenge people on the autism spectrum. We can improve communication by better monitoring these patterns in our own speech when we interact with a person with ASD.

When conversing with most people on the autism spectrum, it can be helpful to “verify and clarify.” That is, you should confirm that what you said has been understood in the manner you intended. If a miscommunication has occurred, you should clarify your intent or content. Do not be surprised if individuals with ASD need further clarification. Of course, this may also happen in conversations between neurotypicals. Respectfully requesting and adding clarification should be our goal regardless of our communicative partner.

Nonverbal Communication

Keep in mind that much of what we communicate with each other happens nonverbally. Our interest in initiating and maintaining a social interaction is conveyed in our posture, facial expression and eye contact. Furtive glances at the door may indicate an intense desire to escape. Like many people on the spectrum, Mary works hard to better understand these nonverbal cues.

Alternative and Augmentative Communication

In some cases, people with ASD have co-occurring intellectual disabilities that limit their ability to speak. For others, attempting to produce speech is too difficult or inefficient. These individuals are more likely to communicate using speech-generating devices or other

forms of alternative and augmentative communication. The fact that someone uses an alternative to speech for communication, however, does not mean that he or she is incapable of sustaining a positive, complex social interaction.

Some individuals with ASD have family members, friends or support staff who assist them when they go out into the community. Unfortunately, some people in our communities do not look at and respond to the individual with ASD, but instead interact with the adult who is attempting to facilitate the discussion.

We must encourage people to bear in mind that the communication is between the individual with ASD and themselves. Individuals on the spectrum will have a hard time learning the value of interacting with others if people do not communicate directly with them.

Whether a person communicates through speech, a device or pictures, the goal is to effectively engage another person in an interaction that serves a mutual purpose. When sustaining a social communication with an individual on the spectrum (or anyone else), the same rules apply: mutual respect, trust/honesty, verify/clarify. We must be careful not to dehumanize or disrespect an individual simply because they use alternative communication strategies.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

- ▶ Avoid labeling us as “difficult” or “retarded,” or using other pejorative and prejudicial terms. This makes us anxious, and anxiety makes many of us less able to communicate effectively.
- ▶ We have never been typical for even one day, but we would love to understand you, and like it when you try to understand us.
- ▶ We want to be given freedom and allowed to grow, and be provided the supports to do so.

Final Thoughts

Although I have spent a good deal of my professional life learning about ASD and writing about effective treatments for autism and other developmental disorders, I still have much to learn. I have learned a lot about Asperger’s and other ASDs from Mary, but this is not all she has taught me. Mary teaches me about perseverance as she continues to use her analytic strengths to grow and change as a person—something we all should do. Mary teaches me about understanding as she knows that my response to an email may be a week or two behind schedule. Mary teaches me that there are always new ways to look at the world. And she brings joy to my life because there is almost always something to laugh about when we communicate with each other.



About the Authors SUSAN M. WILCZYNSKI, PH.D., BCBA, AND “MARY”

Susan M. Wilczynski, Ph.D., BCBA, is the Executive Director of the National Autism Center in Randolph, Mass. As Chair of NAC’s National Standards Project, she has worked with experts nationwide to establish national standards of education and behavioral intervention for children with autism. Dr. Wilczynski holds a joint appointment with the May Institute, where she serves as Senior Vice President of Autism Services.

“Mary” is a well-respected college professor at a large university in the Northeast. Diagnosed with Asperger’s at the age of 51, she is also the mother of three children.